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To Understand the Polish Attempts at Regionalization: Sociological Remarks

The discussion on regionalization has been going on in Poland for many years, although it has become particularly intensive in the last three years. It is understandable since the change of the political system, changes of social structure, and finally, looking for the right form of the state cause the frequent occurrence of one of the basic questions about the relationships between the centre of authority and local units, no matter whether these are to be regions, provinces or finally other organizational units of authority in the locality. This type of sociological statement, although obvious for the observer of events in Poland, causes asking several sociological and politological questions. The answer or answers to these questions will enable to understand better the social sense of the discussion and the future visions of Polish regionalization. These several comments make an attempt to show the possibility of explaining some problems connected with the Polish regionalization attempts.

The first problem which is, as one could think, the key to understand the frameworks within which the discussion is run about regions and regionalization in Poland, is the question about the role of traditional thinking in our country about the state as an expression of national identity, the one which was shaped under the influence of the 19th-century ideas and the history of gaining independence. The idea of this state was shaped in the social consciousness as the idea of the centralized state, based on the common

feeling of patriotism basing on the romantic tradition typical, first of all, for the area of the old Russian sector. It is enough to even superficially analyse the contents of the school textbooks on history or history of literature to notice that, first of all, the history of land under the Russian annexation is presented there, as the 19th-century history, much less is said about the land under the Prussian or Austrian annexation. This type of the idea of state as the realization of this patriotic idea of the union of all Poles finds its understanding in contemporary opinions coming, first of all, from these circles of the society which treat the romantic tradition as the obligatory canon of thinking of Poles. In this way one eliminates from the very discussion the ones who, because of their past, do not share this romantic tradition or it is even strange to them. It applies, for example, to the society of Upper Silesia but also, although to a much smaller extent, Wielkopolska or the territory of former Galicja. It happens so that this romantic idea in its practical dimension was (and still is) associated with the centralistic practices of the authority in Warsaw, it was, thus, easy to evoke two simple associations functioning for a while in social consciousness. The first consisted in that in these parts of the country where does not function this idea of the state based on the romantic tradition, the regional identity was built (and often still is) on the opposition against not so much centralism in general (because such an idea is too general to exist in common consciousness) but in the opposition to specific expressions of centralism coming from the political practice of the authority in Warsaw. The second association, often met in the journalistic discussions over regionalization, is the association of all the ideas of regionalization as acting against this tradition of patriotic unity, ergo against the interest of the state (some also add — and also of the nation). These both associations are of course the expression of enormous simplifications, but it is the sociologist who should analyse them coldly as an expression of certain states of consciousness.

The paradox of the Polish history is that the period after the Second World War, thus, the period of the so-called real socialism, has introduced in its idea of the state this centralist tradition. It of course resulted from the very systemic assumptions of this type of the state but, which cannot be forgotten, also from the specific social needs resulting from the post-war reality. Poland came then into being as the state in the borders considerably different from the pre-war borders. The consequences were great migrations together with many negative effects, human harm but, first of all, separation from any connections with one's own locality, one's own land, one's region. Thus, then, it was more important for people themselves to identify them in a more generalized way as Poles than in any moment would come their pre-war local connections. For everybody who is well-informed in the complicated associations of this time connected with regional and local elements of the feeling of identity, this

tendency is easy to understand. People from the east preferred to avoid associations with the areas where they lived together, for example, with the Ukrainians, people from Upper Silesia preferred not to come back to their connections with the German population and, the more, to their complicated fate during the occupation.

All these processes occurred when the norm was strong pressure of the authority bordering terror, fear, uncertainty of tomorrow. If, thus, the authorities appealed them for national unity, by which it understood dismissing any regional differences to the background, if it promoted the motto "the whole nation is rebuilding its capital", if it organized populating the so-called Regained Territories, these mottos were widely socially supported.

The practice of governing in the period until 1989, despite many differences which characterized particular periods and governing groups, strengthened in the social consciousness the role of centralized state. It was known that "all the matters are dealt with in Warsaw", that this is where people from even small towns would go to obtain decisions in even minor matters but important for them. One should add to it certain ideological justification which was declared in the 1970s under the motto of "the moral-political unity of the nation", and also another fact — the common belief that such a system of centralized authority was convenient for the contemporary "people of authority" where the whole system of promotions was often based or referring to acquaintances, support, appreciation in this legendary Warsaw. No matter how did the actual powers of the centre and local organs in particular periods since the end of war until 1989 spread (and here even important changes took place), in the social consciousness has been fixed the picture of the authority which is in Warsaw, and on which everything depends. It is obvious that state of affairs did not favour the development of any forms of local or regional identity, it did not favour the public discussion about regionalization. At the same time, the differences between different parts of the country have always existed, although their importance has diminished as a result of large waves of inner migrations and mixing of population.

At the end of the 1980s, during one of the sociological conferences devoted to the problems of local identity it was admitted that Poland was already a country with a relatively small number of regions having clear identification features, thus, clear social separateness. It was surely a true statement, but it did not take into account certain states of social consciousness which allow people not having their own regional past join the processes of recreating regional identity where this identity is built on clear features of cultural separateness.

Changes which occurred in Poland after 1989 have from the beginning had influence on the renaissance of the regional problems in the discussions about the future shape of the state. It is obvious that the processes of live "democratization", suppression of censorship and freedom of word have led to the disclosure of the existing regional differences, to the public appearance of various social groups, groups of interest, associations, and even political parties calling themselves regional. The disclosure of these groups was the natural consequence of the freedom of expression, since these groups have existed earlier often hiding their regional or local separateness. It turned out, however, that the basic problem connected with the return of the discussion on regionalization was the sole clear weakening of the state which in its form from before 1989 turned out to be inefficient in relation to social expectations. If, thus, we want to understand the present state of discussion on Polish regionalization, we must not forget that in the first period after 1989 we had to do with overlapping of both above-mentioned phenomena: that is, the freedom of disclosing one's regional or local identity and clear socially felt crisis of the state in its form established before 1989. The necessity to negate many elements of this "old" form of the state has led to the specific fashion to criticize centralism as the essential part of the state considered as a specific relic of the past epoch. One can put a thesis that in social consciousness centralism has become one of the important elements explaining the deficiencies of the authorities of the past period and its suppression seemed to have open the way to better future. It has soon turned out, however, that the fight for power is taking place in the very centre, it started to concentrate new political élites and give a chance for importance also in the area. It did not stop, however, the processes of revival of local or regional identity, although it moved the accents of political activities of groups or regional organizations from the simple negation of the strong role of the centre to developing and deepening regional, identity aspects, supposed to prove the rights of particular regional communities to wider self-government.

One should stress here a very important thing which essentially differs the Polish attempts at regionalization articulated in the two first years after 1989 from the discussions taking place in Western Europe. In Poland rare were the attempts at regionalization based on the pragmatic arguments of the authorities, thus, easier taking up of accurate decisions in the area, easier social mobilization, closeness of authority and citizen, etc. The Polish attempts of these years stressed almost exclusively the identity aspects, sometimes leading even to the revival of uncomfortable social divisions (especially where the region having its identity has for many years been the place of settling of people coming from other parts of the country). It has led to a specific "perverse effect" which could be observed most clearly during the election campaign to the Parliament in 1991. As a result of the propaganda

campaign carried out by the groups using the identity (and not pragmatic vision of regionalization), political concepts have appeared opposing excessive regionalization which was supposed to weaken the unity of the state and be contradictory to the Polish *raison d'être*. If one more precisely analyses the results of the Parliamentary election in these districts in which earlier these appeared groups propagating the identity version of regionalization, and where there is high percentage of immigrant population (not connected with the cultural tradition of this region), it will turn out that significant success in these regions was gained by the parties clearly opposing such an identity vision of regionalization.

The sociological vision of the revival of the feeling of regional and local affiliation forces now to separate from the political elements of regionalization. In these regions where regional identity is clear (and it must be noticed that Poland is a country relatively poor in region with clearly outlined identity), despite the politicization of the discussion on the regionalization of the country, clear tendencies to manifest one's cultural separateness have developed all the time since 1989. If above, thus, we discussed "the perverse effect" boiling down to the political support of the parties which do not favour regionalization, one must not understand that the social tendencies to stress regionality (thus, develop the feeling of regional identity) have been stopped by this political process. Two factors influenced it. Firstly, in the Polish reality of 1991 the political parties still had very unstabilized electorate, it is, thus, difficult to assume that the very fact of voting for a party meant permanent support for specific policy, in this case policy not favouring regionalization. Secondly, in the situation of the weakness of the country, regional lobbies gained positions in their district or city relatively quickly which allowed them to support these groups which developed the following of regional or local identity.

With the time running local regional élites started to develop from this social system which in the way they could started to signal the necessity to build the new type of state, taking into account regional differentiation. Often these postulates of the change of type of state were formulated in a very immature way, what is important, however, is the passing from the stage of criticizing the centralized state to creative the concept of the state in which regions would have wider powers.

Occurring with great force after 1989, tendencies to the revival of local and regional identity cannot be treated as the only reason for starting the deeper discussion on regionalization in Poland. State theoreticians have pointed many times to the necessity of such an inner reform of the state which would consist in transferring greater powers to the lower levels of authority, including

also the levels intermediate between commune and the centre. Within the framework of this discussion many times have appeared projects of creating regions, although understood differently, once as big districts, once as specific unions of the already existing smaller regions. If we are mentioning it in this sociological sketch, it is done only to show that the discussions of theoreticians and works undertaken in the centre on the reform of the country's administration did not, unfortunately, have wider reflection in the social consciousness, where the problem of regionalization was associated first in the purely identity way (as an expression of recognition of regional separateness justified by cultural differences), and then if underwent systematic politicization.

In this process of politicization of discussion on regionalization it is worth pointing to three solutions which appeared in public discussions. Going from the least to the most radical ideas one should mention:

a) appeals to divide the country into the regions possessing equal rights towards each other and passing them part of the powers concentrated in the centre today, in Warsaw;

b) the ideas of division into regions but with simultaneous differentiation of their powers into different criteria (most often they had in mind the degree of coherence of regional identity, distinctness of this identity or finally creating by region specific cultural and economic identity;

c) the postulates of assigning autonomy to particular regions without dealing with the status of the rest of the country.

The first of the projects consists in not questioned by anybody (even by the opponents of regionalization) claim that the system of inner authority existing before 1989 was the radically centralized system, and that the direction of state transformations should define decentralization and its best form, is regionalization. In this concept, which took different forms in public discussions, it was assumed that the regions would have the same powers and the same attitude towards the centre. There was no agreement as to how to establish the borders of the regions, some wanted that these were districts in their currently existing shape, others, that these were great regions consisting of several contemporary districts, finally, others, that we should come to the traditional, historically existing regions. Each of these ideas was somehow justified but no agreement has even been reached as to one rule of creating these regions. It is important, however, that this new "Poland of regions" had, according to this concept, to be the state in which each of the regions would have the same legal status and the same competencies. Although, at the first sign, this concept seems to be very logical, it was not widely supported in the social forces of the regional and local communities. They were interested rather in building the position of their own region than propagating the global solution concerning the whole

country. The additional explanation of this lack of support may be the fact that such global solution allowed to a large extent the pragmatic approach to regionalization which, from its very nature, was in conflict with identity approach being the *spiritus movens* of the decisive majority of the group raising the problem of regionalization.

The second concept consisted in propagating regionalization but with the assumption that Poland is a country specific enough not to treat each region in the same way, but one should take into account the past, economic situation and, first of all, existence or non-existence of permanent social phenomenon of the feeling of regional affiliation. Before we briefly present the major contents of this concept, it is necessary to remind that in its present borders Poland actually has both regions with stable history and solid bases for the development of regional identity (then, in the sociological sense we can really talk about regions) as well as the areas where as a result of migration it is difficult to talk about long history, about cultural union — i.e. about the elements of identity. In such a situation are surely some areas in the northern and western parts of the country. Taking into account this fact, it must be pointed out that the supporters of this approach to regionalization treat it not as a means of reorganization the inner administration of the state, but as a means of obtaining (some say about regaining) the powers through their specific regions. It is not surprising, thus, that such concepts appear in the discussions which take place in the regions with longer identity tradition, where the groups, associations or political movements try first to show their own right to certain independence of decision, and only then do they look for the chances of realizing this independence in systemic solutions (hence, the more general concept of regionalization appears then).

The concepts of this type have never reached the more precise shape which could be the subject of the serious systemic analysis. From the sociological point of view they are very important, since they express certain state of social consciousness based on the already socially structured interest groups and find their expression in producing the so-called regional ideology which will be further discussed. It does not have to be remained that always when such a concept serves as the basis of some more specific solutions, it causes social conflict, since questions appear on the scope of this separateness, on the scope of special rights, about the limits in which they are to be applied, about the scope of such understood regions with the greater powers, etc. The consciousness of these conflict threats is not always present in the discussions and the supporters of such solutions after use in public discussions of certain simple steps — they univocally consider those who express the opinions pointing to these threats simply as the open opponents of regionalization, and they eliminate them from discussion. Thus, it would be difficult to consider such discussions as representative but they should be,

very seriously, considered as the expression of the political process aiming at the construction of the new form of the state.

The third concept mentioned above is propagating one's own postulates of regional autonomy without asking oneself a question about the structures of administrative division of the whole state in which such a concept of regional autonomy could be realized. It must be admitted that such concepts appear relatively rarely, they obtained the politically structured shape only in Upper Silesia (which does not mean that such postulates do not appear in other regions). It must be also stressed that the supporters of these concepts dealing, as a matter of fact, only with the situation of one's own region, sometimes also talk about the division of the whole country into autonomous regions (the motto — "Poland the country of autonomous regions", sometimes presented as the so-called *pol-lands*), never justify such ideas differently but through proving the sense of assigning autonomy to their own region.

The above discussion is brief, we only want to point to some sociological premise to show the reasons and arguments of politicization of this discussion and finding oneself in this process of some already existing important social institutions, important social movements or, finally, only interest groups. It must be remembered that this discussion is taking place in certain special conditions — in a relative political vacuum (there is still lack of the univocally shaped system of political parties and, what is more important, the system of representation of political interests) and in the period of filling this vacuum through other institutions and social movements which extemporaneously fulfil political functions (we do not mean here the Roman Catholic Church as the regional organization covering the whole country but the churches of different denominations, including of course Catholic Church, fulfilling at the lowest, parish level, the function of organizing social life and in the case of revision with stronger feeling of local and regional affiliation — the organization function for cultural expression of this identity), local social associations, sometimes local or regional organizations of trade unions but also created after 1991 local economic organizations, chambers of commerce and even banks. It is obvious that the far reaching differentiations of these institutions and organizations causes the lack of coherence of this political expressions of the concept of regionalization, which does not surprise anybody, since it equals the general level of discussion about regionalization in which we find the expression of the opinions of different groups rather than looking for systemic solutions. It cannot be neglected that it is this form of the politicization of the discussion which allows to create the new local and regional élites which making use of the political support of the above-mentioned institutions or organizations often officially or unofficially influence the social life of particular districts or large urban communes. The new social fact appears, often perceived as the occurrence of new local and regional centres of real

social power. The above-mentioned new élites coming from these new centres or having only publicly demonstrated their support, have the obvious interest in meeting the political order of these institutions or organizations. In this way the circle closes at the level of social perception of an average citizen, he notices the discussion about regionalization as the expression of the interests of the local or district authority. As the research in Upper Silesia show, the perception of the important elements of regionalization is relatively small, and it must be remembered that the research was carried out in the region where the discussion was particularly lively.

Conscious of this fact, the local leaders of regional movements of the supporters of autonomous solutions (it is of course the extreme form of regionalistic aspirations) resort to creating the so-called regionalistic ideologies. Such ideologies are the means to verbalize the interests of regional groups, but they are also to be the element of social mobilization for such or other form of regionalization. It is not by accident, thus, that they developed particularly exuberantly before the Parliamentary elections of 1991 when particular movements wanted to obtain their own representation in the Parliament. One can expect the new wave of creating and proclaiming such regional ideologies in 1994 before the communal elections.

How can one characterize the most important elements of such ideologies? They are usually based on the important distinction between "one's countrymen" and "foreigners". They often define their homeliness through origin and through acceptance of the visible elements of cultural identity (e.g. coming from some specifically pointed areas, accent or dialect, knowledge of local or regional tradition, etc.). The next constructional step is usually creating a catalogue of the positive features typical for "one's countrymen" and assigning negative features to the "foreigners". Such catalogues are then entered in the social memory through their persistent repetition, through making them famous on every occasion and simultaneously no discussion is undertaken on their truthfulness. This step usually quickly gives sure results but they can be of two types, they can strengthen the feeling of affiliation among "one's countrymen", but they can also cause defensive reactions of the "foreigners" who are assigned the catalogue of negative features. The creators of such ideologies, however, always reach their aim, concentrate attention around the problem and often initiate social mobilization. The next element of this ideology is pointing out that when "we — countrymen" had the due rights to self-government "on our land", we felt all right, since all the evil comes from these "foreigners". Often at this stage one adds, as is the case of movements fighting for regional autonomy, treating autonomy as the panaceum for all problems. Of course, we have sketched here certain scheme, but one can find many of its elements in the regional ideologies occurring in the Polish attempts at regionalization. From the sociological point of view, one can interpret such

ideologies as the specific reaction to the complexes of groups which really for many years have not had the possibility to express their cultural separateness. There would be nothing dangerous in the occurrence of such regional ideologies if not the fact that they appear in the period of deep crisis of the state which, as in the case of Poland of the beginning of the 1990s, is completely helpless towards them and cannot pacify the possible social conflicts resulting from propagating regional ideologies. They really do not serve regionalization as such but hinder the rational systemic solutions and additionally through the opposition towards them they initiate political activities of the opponents of regionalization. They are, however, an important element of discussion on regionalization and, thus, should be analysed with great care.

Regionalization is the step concerning the structure of the state, thus, it cannot be based only on reacting to the postulates expressed in the so-called area. On the other hand, however, if regionalization is to really improve in the future the functioning of the state, it should satisfy the social ambitions, otherwise, it will only become the artificial product having no importance in social life. Thus, in the process of regionalization it is necessary to examine social consciousness, the elements of the concepts and ideologies arising from the ranks. It is not facilitated by the politicization of the whole public discussion about regionalization because it itself, as the specific feature of this discussion explaining some phenomena, has to become the subject of analysis. There is, however, a necessity to take up political reflection which would be a bridge between the sociological reflection and the systemic, legal reflection which tries to systematize specific concepts and include them in the totality of the state system. The separate element of such an analysis should be the so-called local and regional élites as the creators and carriers of regional ideologies. In this case it is also necessary to reach for the skills of the social psychologist who can explain the dynamics of creating of these regional or local élites. If, thus, we want to understand the Polish attempts at regionalization, we can make use of the generalized sociological reflections, but they will give only one of the elements of knowledge necessary to understand all this complicated problem.

Jacek Wódz

Zrozumieć próby regionalizacji (Refleksje socjologa)

Streszczenie

Dla zrozumienia sensu polskich prób regionalizacji, szczególnie dyskutowanych po 1989 roku, trzeba najpierw wskazać kilka cech polskiej tożsamości narodowej. Wizja polskiego nowoczesnego narodu została ukształtowana w wyniku tradycji romantycznej XIX wieku, właściwej przede wszystkim ziemiom dawnego zaboru rosyjskiego. W mniejszym stopniu dotyczy ona ziem zaborów pruskiego i austriackiego. Odzyskanie niepodległości w 1918 roku i uczynienie z Warszawy stolicy utrwaliło tę romantyczną wizję, która z socjologicznego punktu widzenia sprowadzała się do jednolitości cech narodowych (stąd dzisiaj lęki przed podkreślaniem odrębności kultur regionalnych) i do centralnego sposobu rządzenia krajem. Okres po II wojnie światowej nie sprzyjał dyskusjom o regionalizacji, władza czuła się pewniej, sprawując z centrum kontrolę nad całym narodem. Dzisiejsze próby to więc próby pierwsze (bez doświadczeń), obciążone błędem polegającym na tym, iż do walki z centrum przywiązuje się większą wagę niż do rozwijania aktywności oddolnej w regionach, są one poza tym wyraźnie manipulowane dla celów politycznych w okresach wyborów parlamentarnych. Dlatego usiłowania te na pewno nie zakończą się szybkim sukcesem, choć będą stanowić trwały wkład w przyszłe rozwiązania w zakresie decentralizacji (a więc niekoniecznie regionalizacji) kraju.

Jacek Wódz

Die Versuche der Regionalisierung verstehen (Soziologische Reflexionen)

Zusammenfassung

Um den Sinn der polnischen Versuche der Regionalisierung, die vor allem nach 1989 diskutiert wurden, zu verstehen, sollte man als erstes auf einige Eigenschaften der polnischen Identität hinweisen. Das Bild der polnischen Nation wurde in Folge der romantischen Traditionen des 19. Jahrhunderts, die vor allem den Gebieten des ehemaligen russischen Teilungsgebietes eigen sind, herausgebildet. Im geringeren Maße betrifft dies die Gebiete des ehemaligen preußischen und österreichischen Teilungsgebietes. Die Wiedererlangung der Unabhängigkeit im Jahre 1918, das Kreieren Warschaus zur Hauptstadt festigte diese romantische Vision, die vom soziologischen Standpunkt her eine Einheit der Nationaleigenschaften (daher auch die Ängste vor dem Betonen der Verschiedenheit der regionalen Kultur) und der zentralistischen Landesverwaltung bedeutet. Die Zeit nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg war keine günstige Zeit für Diskussionen über die Regionalisierung — die Machthaber fühlten sich sicherer, wenn sie eine Zentralkontrolle über das ganze Volk hatten. Die heutigen Versuche sind daher die ersten (ohne Erfahrungen), sie sind daher mit einem Fehler behaftet, der darauf beruht, daß man den Kampf mit dem Zentrum höher als die Entwicklung der Aktivität von Unten her, in den einzelnen Regionen, schätzt; außerdem werden sie im Wahlkampf deutlich für politische Zwecke manipuliert. Deshalb auch werden die Versuche nicht schnell erfolgreich enden, obwohl sie einen bleibenden Anteil an zukünftigen Lösungen im Bereich der Dezentralisierung des Landes (also nicht unbedingt der Regionalisierung) bilden.